

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 787

CS 207 135

AUTHOR Cooper, Elizabeth J.
TITLE Style: Applications for the Student Writer.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (Saskatoon, Canada, August 15-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Imitation; *Literary Styles; *Observational Learning; Revision (Written Composition); *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Style is teachable and learnable, but literary models should not be introduced for imitation until the basic writer has already developed some fluency in writing; then literature can provide students with examples of experiences that they can internalize, store away, and draw upon in their own writing. A brainstorming exercise, "the messy kitchen," is useful for teaching several writing skills. Students first provide the details of the common, unpleasant experience of cleaning up a messy kitchen. After working out various patterns of organization and their rationales, they next write the actual descriptions. The traditional elements used for teaching style--economy, emphasis, clarity, concreteness, unity and coherence, variety, and correctness--are introduced by the teacher during the process of revision. Only after the students have gained the confidence that they can write--by writing--are they ready to look analytically at the writing of others. To provide students with the secrets of language, to encourage them to be precise, to be adventurous, to be adult, to "try on" a role and therefore a style, teachers must expose them to the process of revision, create a positive learning environment, and keep them practicing and reading. (JL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

† This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

□ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

Style: Applications for the Student Writer

Elizabeth J. Cooper
Associate Professor of Arts and Humanities
University of Houston Downtown College
1 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77002

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth J. Cooper

A paper for presentation at the
Canadian Council of Teachers of English Annual Meeting
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
August 19, 1982

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

in a special session entitled:

WEAVING THE SEAMLESS WEB: REINTEGRATING FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS THE STUDY OF
LITERATURE WITH THE STUDY OF READING, WRITING, AND SPEAKING THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

My topic is the teaching of style, but before I get to specific classroom
applications of integrating reading, writing, and speaking, I want to tell you
some of my assumptions.

I think (with Jane Walpole) that "style is accessible to instruction."¹
Style as option, as the sum of all the linguistic and rhetorical choices a writer
makes, seems to provide the most instructive approach to the problems of composi-
tion.² And with Young and Becker, I see a particular style as a "characteristic
series of choices throughout the entire process of writing, including both
discovery (invention) and linguistic selection and grouping (arrangement)." Young
and Becker take the position, with which I agree, that the domain of style is
coextensive with rhetoric.³ So those of you who may want to argue that my class-
room application is simply a model for teaching rhetoric have a point well taken.

In teaching style/rhetoric, I introduce literary models into the classroom,
but I do not teach style as imitation. In fact, I agree with Sandra Schor that
it is probably a misnomer to talk about teaching style to basic writers; what we
are teaching is control.⁴ While many prominent teachers have taught style as

imitation (e.g., Winston Weathers,⁵ Edward P.J. Corbett⁶), I would argue that style as imitation can only be taught successfully to students at more advanced stages. Basic writers must first develop a fluency by writing; later, copying may have its uses. Ken Macrorie in the third edition of *TELLING WRITING* has students write first, copy later. Only after his students go through fourteen extensive writing assignments, five revisions, and two or three collecting exercises do they get the first imitating assignment.⁷ And *TELLING WRITING* is not written for basic writers.

The function of introducing a variety of literature from all subject areas into the composition classroom is to provide students with examples of experiences which they can internalize, which they can store away, which become part of the unconscious from which they as writers will draw. It is for the purpose of expanding their options. My belief may best be explained by a passage from a recent article in College Composition and Communication:

...style is a sometime thing, a variable quality and not a unique and inseparable reflection of the author's (or student's) personality. The concept of style as the dress of thought allows writers to choose a style just as they choose their persona or their clothes, the choice dependent on appropriateness to the rhetorical or social occasion. This assumption runs counter to the common practice of urging a student to 'develop your own style.' Instead, students ought to be encouraged to experiment with a host of styles---the high, the plain, the middle, the purple, the pedestrian, and the polemic, the comic and the casual, the newest and the period piece. That way, they will eventually develop a repertoire of comfortable and appropriate styles, something they may never achieve if they are jacketed into force-grown styles at the age of eighteen.

Before students can experiment with styles, however, we must help them to at least intuit the variety of styles and means of expression available to them.⁸

One classroom application useful with beginning basic writers is a group brainstorming exercise which I call "the messy kitchen." Most people at one time or another have made significant kitchen messes or, worse, they have been responsible for cleaning up after the messiness of others, an issue that many remember fairly vividly because of the resentment of having to undertake the

unpleasant chore at the time. I get every student to volunteer one or more details which I write on the blackboard---dried fried egg yolk on plates and forks, an overturned cereal-and-milk bowl dripping into the half-open silverware drawer, peanut butter and jelly smeared on the baby's highchair, and so on. Once we get started, students enjoy imagining the yuckiest, gooiest, ugliest messes they might ever have to put their hands in.

After we get numerous specific details on the board, I ask, "how are we going to arrange these details to convey what we might want to convey to a reader about that mess?" There usually follows a discussion about whether relating the writers outrage is more important than describing the mess, whether the details of the mess should first be related to the reader, or whether the reader should first understand the writer's feelings before he can understand the significance of the details. I get students to decide on a specific reader before they make those decisions, and they see how deciding on audience greatly influences their other rhetorical decisions.

Next, I get the students to offer suggestions for organizing the description of the mess. Someone usually takes the camera-eye approach, suggesting that a camera would move slowly around the room picking up scenes as it moves. Someone usually suggests the random approach, writing down what appears on the board as the writer gets to it. (That one usually gets a few boo's from the class, but it provides the occasion to begin talking about the differences between writer-based and reader-based prose.) Someone else suggests relating the little messes first so that the reader is led to increasingly disgusting and horrifying scenes in a climatic fashion. Someone usually suggests describing the mess in terms of what one does to clean it up, in terms of imposing order upon the chaos. Responses indicate that, with that method, the writer feels accomplished at the end for having gotten it all clean and the reader has no reason to feel what the writer had originally felt.

After discussing the utility of the various methods suggested, I get each student to write up the description in the way she sees best. Once we've had the discussions, students realize they have options for ordering; they're working from details already generated and in plain sight before them. We've gone through the invention stage of writing. Now, their tasks are to compose, to order, to structure. When students complete their pieces of description, I read them, select versions which vary widely, ditto them, and distribute them to the class for further analysis. At this point, everyone in the class has a sense of being actively involved in the project, very familiar with the material and the issues of converting writer-based prose to reader-based.

It is at this point that I begin to discuss their pieces of description in terms of the issues we traditionally teach when we teach style---economy, emphasis, clarity, concreteness, unity and coherence, variety, and correctness. We discuss their pieces in detail, and they revise. It is at this point that I introduce short passages of description from well-known or at least more experienced writers. My reasons are several. Basic writers in the act of learning how to write are often positive that they cannot write and never will be able to learn. Especially when they read particularly effective writing, they feel overwhelmed. But after they have been lead through the process step by step to produce acceptable descriptions and feel some accomplishments in having done so, they tend to feel more self-confident, and they are more knowledgable about how to look analytically at the writing of others.

One of the imporant reasons for introducing effective pieces of literature into the basic writing classroom is that most basic writers have very little experience with the written word. Very often my nontraditional students have little familiarity with language other than from their communities (with its own socio-economic variations), from the electronic language of radio and television, and from the specialized rhetoric and song of the church. Many students' first efforts at writing show their attempt to "elevate" their language to the highest level

they know---either that echoing the King James Bible or the jargon of their more middle-class mentors in the schools or community. These students are often verbally very fluent in the oral domain, very imaginative, very inventive with the spoken language. But without having the experience of literature, the images, the turns of phrase, the idioms, as part of the experience which is stored in the unconscious, they are constrained to only a few modes, and they have difficulty finding a genuine voice or a style which comes alive on paper.

I do not argue from the position of the verbal deprivation theorists of the 1960's. On the contrary, I argue that these basic writers come to us with many sophisticated linguistic devices at their command, and it is through practice and analysis they are able to learn to translate those devices and expand their options to other devices in learning to write. The close reading of literature is one of the ways of helping students to expand their options.

The lesson of the kitchen mess is a case in point. Even after the group has come up with the details for the descriptive passages to be written, every student will exercise his linguistic and rhetorical options in various ways. This variety can be discussed, analyzed, appreciated for its variety, commented on for its particular effectiveness.

After the initial writing of the descriptive passage, discussion, and reading of description by other authors, we go through a series of revisions. On the first writing, I require students to include all the details we've generated so we'll have a wealth of material from which to work. Our first revising exercises teach economy.⁹ Samuel Butler wrote, "A young author is tempted to leave anything he has written through fear of not having enough to say if he goes cutting too freely. But it is easier to be long than short." English teachers must teach that lesson over and over again because we've been guilty of teaching the opposite (Your paper has to be 10 pages long. I won't accept fewer than 3000 words).

In teaching economy, I usually teach the combining of sentences, cutting irrelevant detail, cutting repeated ideas and words, cutting unnecessary adverbs and prepositions, cutting the wordiness of too many who, which, that, and there constructions. I also teach the cutting out of empty verbs and verb phrases, especially forms of the copula.

Next I teach emphasis. Here I teach how to manipulate words so that important points are placed in the most emphatic positions. Here it is useful to teach subordination---the use and placement of adverbial and relative clauses, word order, and loose and periodic sentences. Examples from students' papers on the blackboard and examples rewritten from written texts which students have in front of them serve to illustrate the importance of exercising the options of emphatic positioning.

Third, I teach clarity---precision in word choice, avoiding ambiguity (both in placement of modifiers and in word choice), and avoiding jargon. Basic writing students are rarely guilty of using jargon in its "special in-group" sense. What they are guilty of is the tendency to increase their use of "noun-speak" under the false impression that "nouniness" characterizes more acceptable academic or institutional prose. In fact, in a study by Hake and Williams at Chicago State, it was demonstrated that English teachers at the secondary and post-secondary level tended to reward writing which was primarily nominal rather than verbal.¹⁰ Walker Gibson has pointed out that the advertising language of Madison Avenue (heard frequently by students on radio and tv) is characterized by its use of noun adjuncts, e.g., decorator colors; Foodorama living (Foodorama is a kind of refrigerator); and hands-free, group-talk, across-the-room kind of telephone.¹¹

So while teaching clarity, I teach the importance of packing subjects and verbs with the main content of the sentence. Who or what is the sentence about?

What is it doing? Noun subject, active verb. One of my students struggled through three revisions with "The continuation of the policy should..." at which point his sentence went all to pieces. When I got him to see that he had made the verb idea into a noun for his subject, had tucked the subject idea into a prepositional phrase, he began to understand why his sentence dead-ended every time he tried to write the predicate. "The policy should be continued." or "The teacher should continue the policy." "It's a miracle," he said.

In teaching word choice, I don't get into the complexity of the fine points of usage. I discuss the importance of the right word, especially in those pairs of words which are often confused (its, it's, there, too, etc). I teach the importance of getting the correct word because the reader is counting on the writer to provide the correct visual signals for the reader to be able to move through the text and get to the destination of meaning without getting lost or having a wreck. I use stoplights, street signs, highway markers, directional signals, as the analogy to demonstrate how important visual signals are to our success and safety in getting where we want to go.

In teaching concreteness, I teach levels of abstraction. I teach the traditional expository techniques for effective, vivid prose---examples, analogies, definitions, comparisons, contrasts, classifications, divisions, details, descriptions, figures, etc.

In teaching unity and coherence, I teach paragraph organization and development---the use of the topic sentence with supporting details for unity, and repetition for achieving coherence.

And after I've taught students to revise for all of the above, I teach the conventions of writing---the rules of punctuation, spelling, capitalization. I teach these last to continue to emphasize that the conventions are only to be considered in the final editing stages of revision; they are merely distractions at earlier stages of writing unless they are so internalized that they are

automatic (and with basic writers, they rarely ever are). At this stage, students can look up words in the dictionary and rules in a handbook. Also, in the final editing stages, I teach about variety, because I think variety has to be looked at in terms of the whole product. If on rereading their words, students find that they have followed the rules of economy, emphasis, clarity, concreteness, unity and coherence, they've probably achieved sufficient variety to keep their prose readable and interesting. I ask students to check for the overuse of anything, a word, the same kind or length of sentences or paragraphs. At this point in the revising stage, it is useful to have students read each others' papers for the "interest test."

It is possible to view the teaching of composition in much the same way we view the teaching of poetry or fiction or any form of literature. In speaking of the three secrets of writing poetry, poet and writing teacher Marvin Bell tells us: "First one learns to write by reading (of course one has to be writing too). That is, the quality of what one reads makes a difference, and the quality of one's reading attention makes a difference. That's number one."¹²

Noted rhetorician Ross Winterowd would support Bell's position. Winterowd believes that there can be no sharp division between composition theory and literary theory without the impoverishment of each. "As composition is the construction of texts, so reading is their reconstruction, and composition theory must take account of reading theory. In fact, it is virtually impossible to consider the construction of texts without also dealing with their reconstruction."¹³

In my teaching of composition, I have taken the position that writing is primary; getting students to write a lot (regardless of its quality) must come first. At the beginning of any writing course, I encourage students to draw on their own experience, on the rhetorical options with which they are familiar in their everyday life situations. Later on in the course, as I have pointed out, I introduce literature, after I have provided students with some notion of the means of constructing and reconstructing texts.

Bell's second secret of writing (poetry) stems from his belief that "language, compared to the materials of other art forms, has only one thing going for it: the ability to be precise....serious poetry is profoundly adult. It is an adult art, deriving its finest moments from a fully developed heart and mind. Trusting oneself to the language as (William) Stafford does---'adventuring in the language,' as he phrases it---implies the richness of the mature self behind that trust. Therefore the second 'secret' is to look into the distance---not only to see how small one is, but also to see how far one can go."¹⁴ I think the important words here are precision, adventuring, adult.

In teaching nontraditional students the keys to precision, we have to provide them the opportunities, the encouragement to adventure in order to achieve "adulthood." Let me try to clarify. We in the English teaching profession often speak of a seasoned author's style, just as we can speak of an adult's characteristic manner of bearing. One of the ways that children become adults is by playing; they play grown-up, teacher, villain, lover. It is by exercising the options in the repertoire of observed human behavior that children try out what they want to be and eventually become what they are, or do what they do. All of us as parents appreciate our children's attempts at "trying on" other behaviors (with the exception of our own, sometimes, which can be painful). As teachers of students who are immature as writers, we must encourage the trying out of verbal options, many of which are readily found in our rich literary heritage.

Most all of us have learned to walk (I hope), to swim, to ride a bicycle, eventually to drive a car. Most of us learned by trying those things out on our own, failing, trying, failing, observing others, asking questions, risking, making mistakes, catching on, improving, practicing, and so on. I bring up this subject because I want to make a particular point. When we introduce literature into the classroom, we can't forget to remind students how many drafts were probably produced before that final piece before their eyes was

completed, how many volumes writers write and tear up before they produce something worthwhile, how much hard work it takes over and over to produce a finished piece of writing.

In order to encourage adventuring, we must create an environment where there are few risks (of failure, for example) and where play is encouraged. Greg Larson in a recent article in TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE, stresses the value of humor in the classroom. While he doesn't advocate entertainment in lieu of serious instruction and consideration, he advocates the value of levity in engaging the interest of students to change their behavior in ways they have never before been willing to do.¹⁵ Humor in the classroom helps students overcome the effects of negative learning experiences; it relaxes some of the tensions which contribute to writers' blocks.

So in teaching toward precision, we have to adventure toward adulthood. And in doing so we mustn't forget Marvin Bell's third secret in writing (he has three because he says all gall is divided into three parts): "if you do anything seriously for a long time, you get better at it."¹⁶ So, we have to get students to do a lot of practicing writing and reading, and we have to provide them with the tools to analyze what they're doing; we have to expand their repertoire of options.

Style is teachable and learnable. And as educators it is our obligation to provide our students with the best learning environment and experiences which we can. If we keep doing it seriously a long time, we'll get better at it.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Jane R. Walpole, "Style as Option," College Composition and Communication, 31 (May, 1980), pp. 205-212.
- ²Walpole
- ³Richard E. Young and Alton L. Becker, "Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution," reprinted in CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC: A CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND WITH READINGS, ed., W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).
- ⁴Sandra Schor, "Style Through Control: The Pleasures of the Beginning Writer," in McQuade, LINGUISTICS, STYLISTICS, AND THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION, pp. 72-79.
- ⁵Winston Weathers, "Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy," CCC, 21 (May, 1970), pp. 144-149.
- ⁶Edward P.J. Corbett, CLASSICAL RHETORIC FOR THE MODERN STUDENT.
- ⁷Ken Macrorie, TELLING WRITING, 3rd edition (Rochele Park, N.M.: Hayden, 1980).
- ⁸Walpole, p. 209.
- ⁹The ordering of my assignments owes much to the arrangement of instruction in Ronald K. Messer's STYLE IN TECHNICAL WRITING (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, Inc., 1982).
- ¹⁰Rosemary L. Hake and Joseph M. Williams, "Style and its Consequences: Do as I Do, Not as I Say," College English, Vol. 43, No. 5 (September, 1981), pp. 433-451.
- ¹¹Walker Gibson. TOUGH, SWEET & STUFFY: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966).
- ¹²Marvin Bell, "The Technique of the Right Attitude" in Olivia Bertagnolli and Jeff Rackham, CREATIVITY AND THE WRITING PROCESS (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1982), pp. 181-188.
- ¹³W. Ross Winterowd, "Brain, Rhetoric, and Style" in McQuade, LINGUISTICS, STYLISTICS, AND THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION, (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron, 1979), pp. 151-181.
- ¹⁴Marvin Bell.
- ¹⁵Greg Larson, "Humorous Teaching Makes Serious Learning," TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE, Vol. 8, No. 3, (Spring, 1982) pp. 197-199.
- ¹⁶Marvin Bell.